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Title: Findings from the Reading First Implementation Study 2008-09

Author(s): Beth Gamse, Beth Boulay, Alyssa Rulf-Fountain, and Fatih Unlu

Abstract Body

Limit 5 pages single spaced.

Background / Context:

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (PL 107-110) established the Reading First Program (Title I, Part B, Subpart 1), a major federal initiative designed to help ensure that all children can read at or above grade level by the end of third grade. Reading First (RF) builds upon research indicating that effective reading instruction on specific early reading skills, particularly in the primary grades, significantly reduces the number of students who experience reading difficulties in later years. All 50 states and other jurisdictions were awarded Reading First grants between July 2002 and September 2003. By April 2007, states had awarded subgrants to approximately 1,809 local school districts that had provided funds to approximately 5,880 schools nationwide. Because grants to states were awarded over an extended period, and states' competitive subgrant processes varied in length, states, districts and schools are at various stages of implementing Reading First.

The ability to read and comprehend text well is at the heart of educational attainment and as such, is central to all children's elementary school success. Unfortunately, success in elementary school (and beyond) disproportionately eludes many minority and/or economically disadvantaged children. Recent National Assessment of Educational Progress results provide evidence that substantial numbers of primary grade students have not developed adequate reading skills, especially minority children (U.S. Department of Education, 2005); 54 percent of fourth grade students eligible for free/reduced price lunch read at a Below Basic level, compared to 23 percent of fourth graders who are *not* eligible for free/reduced lunch (NAEP, 2005). The \$6 billion investment in Reading First is intended to address precisely this disparity in reading proficiency.

The Reading First Program's focus on improving students' reading skills has significance not only for the funded schools, but also for other elementary schools that serve students who are learning to read. Specifically, the Program Guidance outlines how states and districts are to use their sub-grants to serve other schools than those directly funded by Reading First (USDoe, 2002). Consequently, the program's reach extends beyond the RF-funded districts and schools. Although the U.S. Congress decreased funding for RF by 61% in fiscal year 2008 and eliminated funding in fiscal year 2009, many districts and schools believe RF practices have had positive effects on student achievement and are looking for ways to continue funding for RF practices (see Manzo, 2008). The implementation study results published to date have already contributed to the discussion about the future of these practices in U.S. schools.

Purpose / Objective / Research Question / Focus of Study:

This study was designed to answer two broad sets of questions, each focusing on a different aspect of sustainability of the program. These policy questions are critical to the ongoing conversations about the directions federal education policy should take to close achievement gaps and promote high achievement. The first set of questions is the following: *What are states' planned responses to the Reading First budget reduction?* and *Which RF program elements do state-level staff believe can be sustained beyond Reading First?* These questions address the planned and likely sustainability of the program from the perspective of state-level program administrators. The Reading First Program represented a significant federal investment in primary education, and even though the program itself has since been eliminated, policy makers

and educational practitioners can to learn which specific program elements were deemed sustainable from state directors.

The second set of questions is the following: *Does student achievement in later grades differ for students exposed to Reading First in K-3 compared with students in Title I Schoolwide Program (SWP)¹ schools?* and *Is there evidence that the effect of RF “spilled over” to students in non-RF Title I SWP schools in RF districts?* These questions address the sustainability of program effects on students by examining patterns of student performance after students have completed the targeted grades. Prior program evaluations asked about program impact on students’ reading comprehension at the end of third grade. As students move into upper elementary grades, the balance of instruction shifts from learning to reading to reading to learn, and assessing Reading First students’ later academic performance, relative to peer students’ performance, could tell us whether Reading First students experience any longer-term effects. The current study focused on the academic performance of fifth grade students in particular, because 1) those students have had substantial exposure (up to three years) to the Reading First program in funded schools, and 2) there are a sufficient number of years of data pre-RF implementation to support a rigorous analysis.

Setting:

This study was conducted both nationally (for the state-level interviews) and using student-level data from RF and Title I schools in 15 states.

Population / Participants / Subjects:

State RF and Title I directors comprised the sample for the interview portion of the study. Data were also obtained from 15 states that had collected and maintained individual student-level test scores on states’ standardized reading assessments as well as enrollment data over a continuous span of time that began at least one year before the Reading First program was implemented in that state. These included: Arizona, Arkansas, Colorado, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Minnesota, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, South Dakota, Texas, Utah, and Wisconsin. This group of states was not representative of all states per se, as it included only those states whose data systems met the conditions described above; however, this set of states funded 2,357 RF schools, approximately 40 percent of all RF schools funded nationally.

Intervention / Program / Practice:

The Reading First program’s overarching goal is to improve the quality of reading instruction and thereby improve the reading skills and achievement of children in grades K—3. The RF program provides resources at state and local levels: 1) to ensure that research-based reading programs and materials are used to teach K—3 students; 2) to increase access to and quality of professional development for all teachers who teach K—3 students, including special education teachers, to ensure that they have the skills necessary to teach these reading programs effectively; and 3) to help prepare classroom teachers to screen, identify, and overcome barriers to students’ ability to read on grade level by the end of third grade. The programs and the

¹ Title I Schoolwide Programs operate in schools in which not less than 40 percent of students are from low-income families. See ESEA, 2001, Title I, Part A, Subpart 1, Section 1114 (a)(1)

professional development provided to school staff must use reading instructional methods and materials that incorporate the five essential elements of effective primary-grade reading instruction, as specified in the legislation: 1) phonemic awareness; 2) decoding; 3) vocabulary development; 4) reading fluency, including oral reading skills; and 5) reading comprehension strategies.

Research Design:

The first set of research questions was addressed by using qualitative methods to provide a systematic review of states' responses to the reduced funding for Reading First. The second set of research questions was addressed through secondary analysis that used a difference-in-differences approach to analyze student-level, fifth grade reading achievement scores both prior to and after the implementation of Reading First.

A difference-in-differences approach was used to estimate the difference between the actual achievement of fifth grade students who had attended RF schools and their predicted achievement, which is based on achievement data collected both prior to RF and from students in non-RF schools. This quasi-experimental approach controls for many of the plausible alternative hypotheses that could explain any observed differences in achievement.

Data Collection and Analysis:

Data were collected by conducting interviews with each state's Reading First Director and Title I director in late summer and early fall 2008 to learn about which programmatic features of Reading First states are continuing to support with more limited resources, which features states are deeming lower priority, and which features state personnel anticipate can be sustained in the absence of federal support.

Student level achievement, demographic and attendance data were collected from 14 states. Student-level data sets were constructed with indicator variables designating whether a student attended an RF or Title I SWP school prior to or after the start of RF in K, 1st, 2nd, or 3rd grade. We then modeled the effect of RF on student achievement controlling for prior student achievement in those schools, as well as a range of school and student characteristics.

Findings / Results:

Findings from the Interviews with State Directors

Findings are embargoed pending release of report results by the U.S. Department of Education (anticipated early 2011).

Appendices

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Appendix A. References

References are to be in APA version 6 format.

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